Armor Against the Huertgen Forest:

The Kall Trail and the Battle of Kommerscheidt

by Captain Mike Sullivan

"The mission of Armor is to close with and destroy the enemy by means of fire, maneuver and shock effect."

FM 17-15, Tank Platoon,
3 April 1996

Today's armor force is based on a highly flexible, mobile, and lethal armor doctrine. Terms such as maneuver and shock effect are the keynote phrases of the modern United States armor community. Steeped in tradition, the U.S. armor forces have long sought to fight a war of maneuver where speed and cunning mimicked the cavalry battles of old. But in late 1944, when U.S. mechanized forces entered the Huertgen Forest, they lost their ability to fight as a maneuver force. On terrain both unfamiliar and unsuitable for maneuver warfare, and denied the elements of speed and maneuver, U.S. armor was no longer a highly flexible arm of the combined arms team. On the Kall Trail in November 1944, both the restrictive terrain of the Huertgen Forest and the stubborn resistance of the German defenders seriously challenged U.S. armor doctrine.

The lessons learned from the Kall Trail battle are highly applicable to today's armor force as we find our tanks in increasingly restrictive terrain, whether in the streets of Somalia or the rugged hills of Kosovo,

Approach to the Huertgen

On 21 July 1944, the *New York Herald-Tribune* headlines had screamed, "Allies in France Bogged Down on Entire Front,"[1] but by September, the tide had changed and the Allies were literally at Germany's doorstep. After the successful breakout from Normandy in Operation Cobra, and the defeat of the Germany counterattack at Mortain, armor spearheads drove deep into the heart of the German army. Thousands of Allied tanks charged across the open fields of France and into the plains of Belgium. Limited by fuel shortages and Allied air superiority, German armored units were rapidly depleted. As the Americans approached Aachen, birthplace of Charlemagne and the first German city threatened with capture, it seemed clear nothing could stop the weight of the Allied armor onslaught.

As the Allies neared Germany, Lieutenant General Courtney Hodges' First Army approached Aachen. First Army had moved north of the Ardennes to support Field Marshal Bernard Law Montgomery's 21st Army Group, on his left. General Hodges' three corps reached the German border with enough combat power to attempt a breach into the enemy homeland,[2] but as the battle for Aachen began, Hodges felt it was important to protect his right flank from a potential attack. A veteran of the First World War, Hodges recalled the devastating attack launched from the Argonne Forest against American forces in 1918.[3] With the Huertgen, another massive forest, on his flank, Hodges ordered units to protect his right.

The Germans were surprised he took this approach. As they noted in an after-action report of the fighting in the Huertgen:

"The German command could not understand the reason for the strong American attacks in the Huertgen Forest, after the effectiveness of the German resistance had been ascertained. There was hardly a danger of a large-scale German operation pushing through the wooded area into the region south of Aachen, as there were no forces available for the purpose and because tanks could not be employed in the territory. In fact, such an operation was never planned by us."[4]

An Uphill Battle Ahead

The 9th Infantry Division, supported by elements of the 3d Armored Division, moved towards the Huertgen Forest. Unbeknownst to Allied intelligence, on the other side of the forest lay key strategic dams that controlled the level of the Roer River, a major obstacle on the drive to the Rhine.[5]

Named for a nearby village, the Huertgen Forest was a 70-square-mile region that actually encompassed three major state forests, the Roetgen, the Wenau, and the Huertgen. The forest is an extension of a large wooded region stretching across the German border into Belgium. A ridge system runs through the area from southwest to northeast. The highest parts are over 2,100 feet in elevation west of Monschau and the lowest area (600 feet above sea level) near Duren. The ridge divides the areas into three separate compartments. Numerous cold, fast-moving streams cut through the area with steep banks. The Weisser Weh creek and Kall River are two of the major water obstacles in the area. The east-west road networks were limited and the only major north-south routes ran along the edges of the forests. No roads in the Huertgen area could support heavy volumes of traffic.[6]

The forest provided almost perfect terrain for a defense. Pine trees often grew over a hundred feet tall and blocked out light. The steep ridges and slopes coupled with the lack of sun penetrating through the trees, kept the ground constantly moist and cold. Fog permeated the area. The water table was within a few feet of the surface. An attacker fighting from west to east faced increasing higher ridgelines, thereby nearly always attacking uphill.

The forest was originally cultivated as an obstacle to prevent an invasion into Germany from Belgium, and the West Wall tied perfectly into its confines.[7] German engineers sited over three thousand pillboxes, dugouts, and observation posts to exploit the natural terrain features. The pillboxes, many of

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them circular, were made of steel eight to ten inches thick covered by a layer of concrete a foot deep. Tank obstacles included ditches covered by pillboxes and hundreds of miles of "dragon's teeth." Passable roads were blocked with cratering charges. The Germans realized the defenses could only delay an attack into Germany, not prevent an invasion.

Critical to the forest's defenders was Hitler's need for time to build up forces for his impending Ardennes counteroffensive.[8] The Huertgen Forest was the perfect place to delay the Allies while preparing for his grand assault. Tech Sergeant George Morgan, 1st Battalion, 22nd Infantry, said of the Huertgen:

"The forest up there is a helluva eerie place to fight… Show me a man who went through the battle… and who says he never had a feeling of fear and I'll show you a liar. You can't get protection. You can't see. You can't get fields of fire. Artillery slashed the trees like a scythe. Everything is tangled. You can scarcely walk. Everybody is cold and wet, and the mixture of cold rain and sleet keeps falling."[9]

It was in this terrain that American armored forces would face their toughest fight.

The Armor Balance

After battling their way from Normandy to the German border, American tankers developed battle drills and standard operating procedures (SOPs) to defeat the superior German armor. Although outnumbered nearly 10 to 1 in tank production, the principal German tanks were as good as, if not better than, the Allied tanks. The most common tank in the German army was the Mark IV. Equipped with a high-velocity 75mm cannon, it had a top speed of 38 kph (21 mph) and was used throughout the war. Easily produced and modernized, the Mark IV was the backbone of the German panzer force.[10] The Mark V, better known as the Panther, was one of the best tanks of the war. With sloped, thick armor, and a top speed of 46 kph, the Panther was highly survivable. It could destroy any enemy tank in existence during 1944 at a combat range of two thousand meters with its high-velocity 75mm cannon and top speed of 46 kph (29 mph). The high muzzle velocity of the Panther's cannon (1,120 meters per second) allowed it to penetrate 170mm of vertical armor, equal to that of the Tiger tank's larger 88mm cannon.[11] The other major tank facing the Allied armor forces was the well-known Tiger (Mark VI) tank. Not nearly as numerous as GIs reported, the Tiger was a squat, angular, yet highly armored tank with a very deadly 88mm cannon. The heavy firepower and armor protection, however, sacrificed the mobility on which German armor relied for survivability.[12] Well suited for the defense, Tigers would often delay entire companies of Allied armor. In the Huertgen Forest, Tigers were rarely seen but highly effective when used.

The Allies relied on their mass-produced M4 Sherman tank and its numerous variants. Over forty thousand Sherman tanks and associated variants were produced during the years of 1942-1946, compared with less than fifteen hundred German Tigers produced. The later models of the M4 were mechanically reliable and highly maneuverable, but the high maneuverability resulted from the tank's lack of armor protection. Armor thickness varied from 25mm to 50mm at the frontal slope. The M4 reached a maximum speed of 38 kph (24 mph) and most models had a 75mm main gun. Later models had an upgraded 76mm gun with improved muzzle velocity.[13] However, the majority of the Shermans were under-gunned and under-protected when confronting better German tanks. Shermans relied on their maneuverability and superior numbers to defeat enemy tanks. Mobility was key to the survival of Allied tanks. Hedgerow fighting demonstrated the severe weaknesses of Allied tanks when fighting against both German armor or antitank weapons one-on-one.

In addition, tank destroyers based on the M4 Sherman chassis were used extensively in an assault role. Many were equipped with a larger gun than the tanks, but the turrets of Allied tank destroyers were open and highly vulnerable to artillery fire and airburst ammunition.[14] Tree bursts, so common

in the Huertgen Forest, were extremely devastating to both the vehicles and crews of these combat vehicles.

The Attack Begins

American armor, so reliant on mobility to survive against superior German tanks, entered the forest initially with the 9th Infantry Division. Immediately, the difficult terrain and stubborn resistance of German forces became obvious. The Normandy hedgerow and later bunker fighting had lent experience to U.S. tankers, but nothing prepared them for the defensive terrain of the Huertgen. The tankers, when teamed up with infantry, became highly skilled at taking out fixed positions. "On the dawn of the third day, the enemy developed a counterattack against I Company (3d Battalion, 39th Infantry Regiment). The Americans drove off the Germans and fought forward along two trails while under fire from pillboxes. Tanks and tank destroyers forced the bunkers to button up until the infantry could envelop them."[15] However, the obstacles, coupled with an incredible number of mines, often hindered any attempted armored advance. "Soldiers from L Company, hidden by a smoke screen, cleared a minefield through a gap in the dragon's teeth. But when a tank unit started through the opening, a mine blew up the first one. During the night,

German engineers had re-mined the passageway."[16] Obviously, fighting in the Huertgen promised to be difficult for infantry and armor alike.

The 9th Infantry Division was stopped far short of its objective, the key crossroad town of Schmidt. Two regiments of the 9th ID gained about three thousand yards in the Huertgen Forest, but at the cost of forty-five hundred men. General Hodges set a target date of 5 November for the renewal of the First Army's big push to the Roer and the Rhine. However, before launching his main effort, Hodges knew he still had to secure his right flank. Schmidt was the key, and V Corps would have to take the town while clearing the forest.

The entire main effort fell to one division, the 28th ID. For the first two weeks of November, it would be the only division attacking across the entire First Army front, affording the German defenders the opportunity to concentrate all their resources. The 28th would forever be known as the "Bloody Bucket" after emerging from the horrific fighting in the Huertgen Forest.[17]

Sadly, no key leader realized that the vitally important Roer River dams lay just beyond the town of Schmidt. The only officer to note their importance was the 9th Division G-2, Major Jack Houston. Houston knew the dams could control a downstream flood should the Allies cross the Roer: "Bank overflow and destructive flood waves can be produced by regulating the discharge from the various dams."[18]

The attack on Schmidt by the 28th Infantry Division initially seemed successful. After negotiating the harrowingly narrow Kall Trail, elements of the 112th Infantry Regiment secured the towns of Kommerscheidt and Schmidt. The Kall Trail was merely a cart track that supposedly was to serve as the main supply route for the attacking division. Open and exposed at its entrance by the town of Vossenack, the Kall Trail snakes sharply downward, crosses the Kall River, then continues up some very steep ground into the town of Kommerscheidt. On 3 November, two officers from the 20th Engineer Combat Battalion reconnoitered the Kall Trail and reported it capable of supporting tanks.[19] The 707th Tank Battalion, commanded by Lieutenant Colonel Ripple, was attached to the 28th Infantry Division. Captain Hostrup of A Company supported the 112th Regiment and attempted to move down the Kall Trail.[20]

Members of the 112th Infantry Regiment in Schmidt awaited both resupply and armor support when Captain Hostrup led his first platoon down the trail. As the trail descends towards the river, a large rock outcropping juts out in the path. Opposite the rocky outcropping is a sharp drop of approximately fifty feet. As Captain Hostrup's tank moved down the narrow, muddy trail, it slipped off the edge while trying to maneuver around the rock. Hostrup's driver managed to keep the tank from careening over the cliff and backed the tank up the trail. Hostrup reported the trail was not passable and no armor would reinforce the soldiers at Schmidt until the trail was improved.[21]

As dawn approached on 4 November, engineer efforts to improve the trail yielded little. The rock outcropping remained despite numerous attempts at demolition. Weary U.S. infantrymen in Schmidt were still asleep with little thought given to the defenses of their main objective. Only a few antitank mines were surface laid on the road leading into Schmidt. Captain Hostrup attempted to move his company again around the outcropping on the morning of 4 November. The 1st Platoon, commanded by First Lieutenant Raymond Fleig, led the movement. Just as he managed to maneuver around the outcropping, Fleig's tank struck a mine. The mine blew the track off and partially blocked the trail. Fleig's platoon sergeant, Staff Sergeant Anthony Spooner, suggested winching the other

tanks around Fleig's disabled tank. Using tow cables from the immobilized Sherman, Spooner winched his tank around Fleig's and back onto the Kall Trail. Fleig hopped onto Spooner's tank and ordered his platoon sergeant to repeat the winching process with his three remaining tanks. Fleig continued down the narrow trail towards the Kall River.[22]

The German counterattack against Schmidt started just as Fleig and his tank platoon began their move down the Kall Trail. Led by ten Mark IV and Panther tanks of the 16th Panzer Regiment (116th Panzer Division) and elements of the 1055 Infantry Regiment,[23] the German assault smashed into the defenders of Schmidt. The battalion headquarters was quickly overrun with much of the battalion staff and its commander surrendering. Panic-stricken GIs watched as bazooka rounds ricocheted into the air off the thick German armor. Immediately a stream of GIs headed from Schmidt back to Kommerscheidt. Without tank support, the infantry of the 28th Division had little chance to stop the German assault.

Lieutenant Fleig's remaining three tanks successfully bypassed the outcropping, but one threw a track climbing up the far side of the Kall Trail. Fleig and his two tanks took up positions in a shallow draw in an open field just northwest of Kommerscheidt near the Kall wood line. After driving the Americans out of Schmidt, the German attack spilled towards Kommerscheidt. The Germans did not immediately pursue the fleeing Americans. Instead, German tanks stood out of bazooka range and fired main gun and machine gun rounds into the foxholes of the Kommerscheidt defenders. The Germans then launched an attack against Kommerscheidt with at least eight Mark IV tanks, three Mark V tanks and approximately two hundred infantry.[24]

Fleig immediately maneuvered his tank platoon against the approaching enemy armor. Using the intervisibility line provided by the lower field they were sitting in, Fleig's platoon immediately knocked out three enemy Mark IVs. Fleig noticed GIs retreating from the left side of the town and maneuvered his tank to shore up the now-exposed flank. Fleig entered an orchard just in time to see a Panther tank approaching. Fleig fired at a range of three hundred yards, hitting the German twice but with no effect. The Panther crew, frightened by the shell hits, immediately bailed out of their tank and sought cover. Fleig then realized he had fired high-explosive ammunition, not armor piercing. Worse, Fleig discovered that he had no armor-piercing ammunition inside the tank; all of it was stored outside in the sponson box. Fleig ceased firing and rotated his turret to get at his armor-piercing ammunition. The Panther crew saw Fleig was no longer firing and that their tank was undamaged. They rapidly reboarded their Panther and fired at Fleig, missing high. Fleig and his crew managed to get an AP round into the breech and fired. Luckily for the Americans, their first shot sliced the Panther's main gun barrel in two. Fleig fired three more AP rounds into the side of the Panther before it caught fire and killed the crew.[25] Fleig and two other tanks would act as roving linebackers throughout the battle, destroying a total of five German tanks and stopping the enemy assault. Their ability to maneuver to the hardest hit parts of the town prevented the Germans from overrunning it. By noon on 5 November, an additional Sherman platoon joined Fleig and two platoons of M10 tank destroyers from the 893d Tank Destroyer Battalion reinforced the defenders of Kommerscheidt.[26]

Hampered by the Kall Trail, resupply and reinforcing efforts into Kommerscheidt were extremely limited. The Germans prepared for another assault on 6 November, led by nine Panthers. The Germans left their assembly area at 0500, hoping a limited-visibility attack would drive out the defending Americans. Without infantry support, nine Panthers, three Mark IVs and two Mark V antitank guns (Jagdpanthers) began their assault at 0630. The assaulting German company commander reported: "At a distance of 150 to 200 meters, the advancing platoon was attacked by enemy tanks, which were well concealed but hampered in their movements between houses and in gardens. Owing to poor visibility and the restricted line of fire, the enemy tanks now attempted to retire from their positions. In doing so, they were destroyed by German tanks, which had taken up ambush positions in the gardens outside the town."[27] The defenders uncoordinated efforts resulted in the loss of eight M10s and eight Shermans. The loss of Kommerscheidt eliminated the chance to recapture the key town of Schmidt. The town would remain in German hands until elements of the 505th Parachute Infantry Regiment captured it in February 1945.

The after-action report of the attacking German company commander at Kommerscheidt highlighted the need for "antitank combat by two integrated groups cleverly combines the exploitation of friendly firepower and the reactions of the enemy." In addition, he stated, "A good interplay of movement and fire must be maintained until the moment of penetration."[28] Although severely limited by the horrible Kall Trail, the American armor that initially reached Kommerscheidt fought a battle of maneuver and defeated the first enemy attack. However, the uncoordinated efforts of the M4s and M10s conducting a static defense against a well-coordinated maneuver element in the second attack resulted in defeat for the Americans.

Conclusion

The fighting in the Huertgen Forest was both tragic and unnecessary for U.S. forces. The terrain was not suited for armor operations and the infantry paid the ultimate price, over twenty-eight thousand casualties. An often forgotten and neglected area of study, the Huertgen Forest still provides lessons on how to use armor in battle and what the results are when it is not used correctly. Denied the chance to fight a maneuver battle, U.S. armor in the Huertgen suffered heavy casualties.

In terms of the development of U.S. armor doctrine, the fighting in the Huertgen was a step backward from the significant gains made earlier in the war. Committed piecemeal in the Huertgen's highly unfavorable terrain, American tankers faced the same difficulties experienced by British tankers in their early World War I battles. As U.S. armor forces today conduct peacekeeping operations in unfavorable "tank country," doctrine writers and armor operators should reexamine the lessons learned from the battle of the Huertgen Forest. Tanks will continue to fight on difficult terrain as long as enemy forces defend that ground. Essential to the combined arms team, tankers must learn how to overcome a harsh battlefield environment to ensure future success.

Notes

[1]Quoted in William Breuer, *Death of a Nazi Army* (U.S., Scarborough House, 1985), 11.

[2]John T. Bookman and Stephen T. Powers, *The March to Victory: A Guide to World War II Battles and Battlefields from London to the Rhine* (New York: Harper and Row, 1988), 264.

[3]Gerald Astor, *The Bloody Forest* (Novato, Calif., Presidio Press, 2000), 37.

[4]89th Division Review, translated by IPW team 11.

[5]Bookman and Powers, *March to Victory,* 264.

[6]Edward Miller, *A Dark and Bloody Ground* (College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 1995), 12.

[7]Ibid., 12-13.

[8]Astor, *Bloody Forest,* 8.

[9]Miller, *Dark and Bloody Ground,* 1.

[10]Dr. S. Hart and Dr. R. Hart, *German Tanks of World War II* (London: Brown Books, 1998), 79-81.

[11]Ibid., 105-107.

[12]Ibid., 120-121.

[13]Chris Ellis, *Tanks of World War II* (London: Chancellor Press, 1997), 163.

[14]Ibid., 57.

[15]Astor, *Bloody Forest,* 47.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Peter Herrly, "Battle of the Huertgen Forest Battlefield Staff Ride Workbook" (REEP, Inc. 1999) 45.

[18]Miller, *Dark and Bloody Ground,* 32.

[19]Ibid., 67.

[20]Herrly, "Battle of the Huertgen," 73.

[21]Miller, *Dark and Bloody Ground,* 67.

[22]Allyn R. Vannoy and Jay Karamales, *Against the Panzers: United States Infantry versus German Tanks, 1944-1945,* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland and Co., Inc., 1996), 104.

[23]Adolf Hohenstein and Wolfgang Trees, *Holle Im Huertgen-Wald,* (Aachen: Triangel, 1981), 153.

[24]Miller, *Dark and Bloody Ground,* 71.

[25]Vannoy, *Against the Panzers,* 111.

[26]Ibid., 73.

[27]Siegfried von Waldenburg, "Report on 116th Panzer Division (1-9 Nov. 44)," (Historical Division Headquarters United States Army, Europe, 1954), 58.

[28]Ibid., 61.

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